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Rabbit Control

Fact Sheet series for the Small Rural Landholder

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The Issue

Rabbits are an established pest animal in Victoria.

Landowners are responsible for the control and, where possible, eradication of established pest animals on their land.

Rabbits can reproduce quickly and have a high potential to cause significant environmental damage in a short period of time. Breeding season generally peaks during spring.

Rabbits prefer to live underground in warrens, however they will readily live above ground if sufficient cover is available (for example, undisturbed gorse or blackberry stands or abandoned infrastructure).

Generally rabbits will tend to remain within a 200m radius 'home range' of their warren or nest.

Rabbit control

Rabbits affect agricultural land by causing erosion, waterway degradation, water quality decline, vegetation loss and contribute to the spread of weeds.

They compete with livestock for grazing, and also with native animals and birds for food and habitat.

Control methods will depend upon numbers, access to the affected areas and whether rabbits are living in warrens or above ground.

Control must be carried out strategically and via a number of methods to ensure adequate results.

Working with neighbours to ensure complete coverage of the rabbits' home range may be necessary.

The optimum time to implement an eradication plan is when rabbit numbers are low. Most often, prior to their peak breeding season. This approach will be more successful and cost effective than waiting until rabbits are actively breeding.

A number of rabbit control methods are available but vary in both their effectiveness and welfare implications for the pest animal (see **Table 1**).

Methods chosen to eradicate rabbits must be selected for maximum effectiveness. The aim is to cause minimum suffering and pain to both the target species, and any potential off-target species.

For example, baiting rabbits with the poison 1080 is a more humane method of control than the use of but 1080 has implications for off-target species.

Alternatively, shooting may be an option for small numbers of rabbits. However it would not be considered a humane option if the shooter was inexperienced and not able to ensure an effective kill shot.

Management Strategies

It is advisable to employ experienced contractors with the appropriate machinery and any relevant licensing for chemical or firearms use.

Check with local authorities regarding any permits or permission required before undertaking any control works.

If you are not working together with your neighbours on rabbit control, it is recommended you inform them of any baiting, shooting or works being undertaken prior to commencing control methods.

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COMMON GROUND

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Key Points:

Landowners are responsible for the control of declared plant and animal pests on their properties.

- Control methods should be humane, effective and target specific.
- Employ an experienced contractor with relevant licenses and a good reputation.
- Plan a multifaceted approach, considering multiple control methods.
- Consult your neighbours and relevant local authorities regarding local laws.

In some cases the eradication of pest animals may need to be carried out in conjunction with noxious weed control. For example, in the case where a regionally controlled or restricted weed thicket is also harbouring rabbits.

Information on landholder legal rights and responsibilities with regard to noxious weeds and pests: *http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/pests-diseases-and-weeds/protecting-victoria-from-pest-animals-and-weeds/legislation-policy-and-permits/noxious-weed-and-pest-animal-*

Australian Government | National Landcare Programme

This project is supported by Western Port Catchment Landcare Network through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme.

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Eradication examples:

Warrens

An example of a staged eradication plan where rabbits are living in warrens may include:

1. Using the poison bait 1080 on the ground to reduce large numbers;
2. Warren ripping; and
3. Targeting any remaining animals using experienced shooters.

Woody weed zones

A staged plan where rabbits are living in woody weed thickets may include:

1. Using the poison bait 1080 on the ground to reduce large numbers;
2. Aggressive control of woody weed refuges, for example slashing gorse and blackberry thickets; and
3. Using licensed hunters with net traps and dogs/ferrets to flush out any remaining or inaccessible areas.

Other management considerations

If woody weeds are harbouring a large number of rabbits on your property, they will need to be addressed concurrently. Be aware that this may potentially remove habitat for non-target species (e.g. native birds and animals). Aim to replace woody weeds with alternative, useful and preferably native or indigenous plant species.

Additionally, you may need to check your responsibilities as a landowner regarding vegetation removal. i.e some species may be protected whilst other vegetation may be required to be controlled or eradicated from your property (for example, gorse and blackberry).

Note: Vegetation classifications will depend on your catchment region.

Table 1: Humaneness, Efficacy, Cost-effectiveness and Target Specificity of Rabbit Control Methods (Adapted from Sharp and Saunders, 2012).

Control technique	*Acceptability of technique with regard to humaneness*	*Efficiacy*	*Cost effectiveness*	*Target Specificity*	*Comments*
Fertility control	Conditionally acceptable	Unknown	Unknown	Depends on agent used	No products currently registered.
Exclusion fencing	Acceptable	Limited	Expensive	Can be in certain situations	Useful where there is high-value crop/pasture (e.g. market garden/horticultural enterprises) or in conservation areas. Expensive, therefore impractical for broad scale application.
Ground baiting with 1080	Conditionally acceptable	Effective	Cost-effective	Potential risk of poisoning non-target animals	Effective for reducing rabbit populations prior to warren destruction. 1080 ingestion can also kill non-target animals including native species, cats, dogs and livestock. 1080 is toxic to humans; operators need to take precautions to safeguard against exposure.
Aerial baiting with 1080	Conditionally acceptable	Effective	Cost-effective	Potential risk of poisoning non-target animals	Effective for reducing rabbit populations prior to warren destruction. Useful in difficult areas and broadscale areas. 1080 ingestion can also kill non-target animals including native species, cats, dogs and livestock. 1080 is toxic to humans; operators need to take precautions to safeguard against exposure.
Pindone baiting	Only acceptable when there is no other alternative. Inhumane compared to 1080	Effective	Relatively expensive (compared to 1080)	Potential risk of poisoning non-target animals (esp. macropods and other native species)	Should only be used in areas where it is impractical or unsuitable to use 1080 e.g. urban/residential and semi-rural areas.
Pressure fumigation of warrens using chloropicrin	Not acceptable			Non-target wildlife using warrens are vulnerable	Inhumane and must not be used. Alternatives are available.
Diffusion fumigation of warrens using phosphine	Conditionally acceptable when rabbit populations are low	Variable effectiveness	Expensive	Non-target wildlife using warrens are vulnerable	Labour intensive. Warren is not destroyed therefore it can be easily recolonised. Unsuitable for large areas.
Warren destruction by ripping	Conditionally acceptable when rabbit populations are low	Effective	Cost-effective	Non-target wildlife using warrens are vulnerable	Where warrens are the principal shelter for rabbits, ripping is the most cost effective and most longlasting method of control. Cannot be used in inaccessible, rocky or environmentally sensitive areas.
Warren destruction using explosives	Conditionally acceptable when rabbit populations are low	Effective	Relatively expensive (compared to ripping)	Non-target wildlife using warrens are vulnerable	Provides long term management of rabbit populations. Requires trained and licensed operators and adherence to strict OH&S requirements. Effective in inaccessible and rocky areas.
Treatment of rabbit warrens using LPG technology (Rid-a Rabbit®)	Has not been assessed, but thought to be inhumane	Unknown	Unknown	Non-target wildlife using warrens are vulnerable	Labour intensive. Warren is not destroyed therefore it can be easily recolonised. Unsuitable for large areas.
Ground shooting	Acceptable	Not effective	Not cost effective	Target specific	Shooting may be effective to control small isolated rabbit populations but is inefficient for general control. It is time consuming and labour intensive and not suitable in certain situations e.g. where dense cover is available, inaccessible or rough terrain, near human habitation.
Biological control with RHDV	Conditionally acceptable	Variable	No cost	Target specific	Effectiveness depends on habitat. RHDV outbreaks should be followed up with conventional control methods to achieve more long-term control of rabbit populations. Bait delivery of the virus is a more humane technique of producing outbreaks of RHD because it does not require live capture and handling of rabbits for inoculation.
Biological control with myxomatosis	Depends upon strain. Highly virulent strains will kill rabbits quickly.	Unpredictable effectiveness. Has become less effective over time	No cost	Target specific	This is a self-disseminating virus that is already widespread in the environment. It is not routinely used as a control technique though natural outbreaks should be followed up with conventional control methods to achieve more long-term control of rabbit populations.
Soft-jawed traps	Conditionally acceptable	Not effective	Not cost effective	Risk of catching non-target animals	Occasionally used in areas with small isolated rabbit populations but are inefficient for general control.
Toothed, steel-jaw traps	Not acceptable	Not effective	Not cost effective	Risk of catching and causing severe injury and distress to non-target animals	Inhumane and must not be used. Alternatives are available.

*Acceptable methods are those that are humane when used correctly. ^Conditionally acceptable methods are those that, by the nature of the technique, may not be consistently humane. There may be a period of poor welfare before death. #Methods that are not acceptable are considered to be inhumane. The welfare of the animal is very poor before death, often for a prolonged period.

Further reading and resources:

Sharp, T. and Saunders, G. (2012) Model code of practice for the humane control of rabbits, accessed via http://www.pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/rabbitCOP2012.pdf